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SUBJECT: DIALOGUE OF RELIGIONS CONFERENCE: AMIR WELCOMES
PARTICIPATION OF JEWS

11. (U) Summary. The Amir of Qatar opened the Third Conference on Dialogue of Religions and welcomed Jewish participants for the first time. (Though none came from Israel, there was a five-member delegation of rabbis from the U.S.) In his opening remarks, the Amir expressed liberal views on reforming Islamic practice and improving Muslim societies through a deeper understanding of other "religions of the book." There were fewer high-level attendees at this year's event, in part because of the presence of Jewish leaders. Prominent cleric Dr. Yousef al-Qaradawi was the most noticeable absentee, having said he will only interact with Jews who reject Zionism. Muslim and Christian leaders in the opening session emphasized the value of dialogue; a Jewish leader from France added the concept of belonging to a state as well as a religion, saying that both institutions share the goal of improving the human condition. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The Amir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, opened the Third Conference on Dialogue of Religions, billed as focusing on religion's role in enhancing human values and civilized behavior. Twenty-nine Christian leaders attended from Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America. Seven Jewish leaders attended, chiefly from the U.S. No Israeli Jews participated, however. Post understands that it was the Amir's wish that Israelis be invited, but resistance at the level of the organizing committee, which was dominated by professors from Qatar University, resulted in a downgrade of the status of the Israeli invitees. They would not be panelists but could make comments from the floor. On this basis, the Israeli delegation declined to attend. The American Jews, though concerned about the treatment of their co-religionists, were encouraged by Embassy to attend, to ensure and build upon interfaith progress expected at this year's event.

13. (SBU) The story of invitations for the Israelis an off-scene drama, with the Dean of Sharia Law at Qatar University quoted in local papers well before the event denying any Israeli participation. Later, the GOQ took credit anyway for inviting the Israelis, the local Arabic press prominently announcing that they had been sent invitations. Any Jewish participation at all was enough for cleric Dr. Yousef al-Qaradawi to follow through on his threat to avoid any such interaction. One of his associates, Dr. Ali Muhi-Eddin al-Qaradaghi (a fellow professor but not related), was selected to give the Muslim portion of opening remarks.

Amir: Progressive Opening Remarks

14. (U) The Amir's opening remarks took a liberal stance. He highlighted three main tracks that are needed to support inter-religious dialogue. The first track is the promotion of exchange of knowledge among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism through the translation of the basic texts into Arabic and foreign languages. The Amir supported the establishment of joint institutions to carry out this task. The second track is to focus on the social and cultural issues needed to achieve rapprochement and cooperation, especially including the role of women in society, as a means to understanding the ethics of Muslim societies. The third track is to find ways of joint cooperation in solving chronic conflicts in order to realize peace and accord. The Amir's opening remarks were followed by those of other keynoters, with a French Jewish lay leader speaking first. An Egyptian Catholic bishop and Qaradaghi came next, reflecting the order their faiths were codified.

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Introductory Remarks

15. (U) The Jewish leader, Bernard Canovich, from France, introduced the idea that part of one's cultural identity is national as well as religious. Both France's republicanism as well as his own Judaism have the same goal, he said, which is the betterment of the human condition. He related an eloquent story from the Jewish tradition that dawn only begins when one recognizes other persons as one's brother or sister.

16. (U) The Egyptian Catholic, Archbishop John Thabet Qelta, arrived (after some length) at the point that engaging in dialogue is a form of holiness. Without mentioning any specific territory, he said that "all land is holy" because it is regarded so by different religions. He spoke of the universality of

spirituality, and how the modern era as affected, in many cases distracted, from the spiritual condition of humankind.

17. (U) Dr. Ali Muhi-Eddin al-Qaradaghi, professor of jurisprudence and religion at Qatar University, argued that the Quran is a "book of dialogue" with others. He noted that Muslims, Christians, and Jews shared objectives at the 2000 Cairo Conference on the Family. He called on people of different religions to "defend what is right" rather than defending one's own sect without discrimination. He noted however that "resistance is legal" in all the prophetic religions in cases of occupation by a foreign power, but that Islam denounces terrorism, violence, and intimidation. He added that what is happening in the Islamic world today is caused by injustice and occupation. On this point, al-Qaradaghi appeared to be voicing Dr. Yousef al-Qaradawi's position on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, urging an end to Israeli occupation and giving Palestinians their rights. He ended by calling on the "powers of the world" to change their attitudes toward Iraq and Palestine. Here, al-Qaradaghi seemed to be addressing in a more direct manner what the Amir was alluding to in his third track - that there can be no peace without addressing the Palestinian and Iraqi issues.

Regional Politics Mixes with Religion

18. (SBU) Later sessions focused on the role of religion in improving human civilization. However, one of the participants, George Saliba, a Christian representative from Lebanon, criticized the West for being unduly influenced by Israel. Mr. Saliba commented that the leaders of the Western countries were not true Christians because they are ruled by Zionists and asserted that Zionists are "disastrous for Christians as well as Muslims."

19. (U) There were elements of true dialogue, including the progressive opening speech by the Amir and remarks by Princeton University Professor and Rabbi Mark Cohen on how to revive historically-tolerant Muslim-Jewish relations. But attitudes toward Israeli politics and the inclusion of Jewish leaders, as well as the lack of true religious luminaries, conspired to deaden the conference. There were no breakthroughs or inspired thinking. In the last session, as an illustration, a participant from the audience stood up to declare the need to condemn terrorism "in all its forms" including U.S. actions in Afghanistan. How someone could have the energy for such a rant at 8 PM after two full conference days shows the uninspired nature of the event.

Conclusion: A Center for Religious Dialogue in Doha

10. (U) The Third Conference on Religious Dialogue issued, at its conclusion, a set of recommendations, the most concrete component of which supported the Amir's proposal to establish a center in Qatar for religious dialogue. The center would aim to deepen "reciprocal knowledge" of the three monotheistic religions and work toward comprehending and removing "historical handicaps" to understanding. The conference's recommendations also call for establishing in Islamic countries academic departments in comparative religion, undertaking exchanges of religious teachers, and "purifying" the media of negative religious stereotyping.

No Announcement of Churches in Qatar

11. (SBU) Perhaps knowing, in advance, that the atmosphere of dialogue and the international exposure were not optimal, the Amir did not officially announce the approval of concessionary property leases for several Christian denominations in Doha, an agreement that was signed in May 2005 (reftel). Local Christian leaders had expected such an announcement. The Amir may do so at a more auspicious moment, or he may determine that there is no domestic political benefit in making such a public announcement.

Comment

12. (SBU) The less-than-stellar level of participation, the continued controversy in the press over invitations to the Israelis, and perhaps also "conference fatigue" following the massive G-77 Summit in Doha, contributed to a disappointing Dialogue of Religions. Nevertheless, Qatar -- but in particular the Amir -- deserves credit for trailblazing the inclusion of Jewish thinkers on Arab soil.

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